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ABSTRACT

When children are taught to read, the sources used are usually fictional narratives; writing follows in the same genre with children learning how to write personal narrative. Narrative has been such a part of the tradition in primary grades that even the information books that are available for the young are often written in a narrative structure. Recent research suggests there needs to be a more balanced approach in using fiction and nonfiction books in teaching reading. The ability of children to understand and interact with this type of text grows as they are given opportunities to work with expository texts. This topical bibliography and commentary looks at the difference between expository and narrative texts, the reasons educators give for integrating expository texts into daily teaching, and the ways in which teachers can accomplish this task. The bibliography/commentary states that the main reason for use of informational, or expository texts in the primary classroom is to better prepare students for the informational texts they will be exposed to in later schooling. It concludes that informational texts may provide access to reading and literacy for diverse types of learners and expand children's literary experiences. Lists an Internet resource and 16 references. (NKA)

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The Value of Expository Text for Today's World

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Introduction

In recent years, educators have challenged the predominant use of narrative texts in the primary-grade classroom (Yopp and Yopp, 2000, p. 410). It is estimated "that as many as 90% of the texts elementary school children encounter are narrative in form" (Caswell and Duke, 1998, p. 108). When children are taught to read, the sources used are usually fictional narratives; writing follows in the same genre with children learning how to write personal narrative.

There are various reasons teachers have been drawn to narrative texts in teaching children to read. The most obvious reason is that most basal reading series use a narrative format (Caswell and Duke, 1998, p. 114). But another major influence on using narratives in the classroom is that "at first a great deal of children's thinking is done through the narrative form" (Fox, 1989; cited in Mallett, 1992, p. 45). If children think in narrative, it makes sense to teach from that natural ability. Narrative is also a powerful method of organizing thoughts and feelings. Another elementary skill, sequencing of events, seems easier to teach and learn through the use of narrative. Narrative has been such a part of our tradition in the primary grades that even the information books that are available for the young are often written in a narrative structure (Mallett, 1992, p. 45-6).

Recent research has suggested that there needs to be a more balanced approach in using fiction and nonfiction books in teaching reading. Many "educators and researchers from a range of theoretical and pedagogical orientations have called for greater attention to non-narrative texts in elementary school" (Caswell and Duke, 1998, p. 114). Pappas (1991) supports the view that "young children are as capable of understanding informational text as narrative text" and especially rejects the claim that "young children are unable to make sense of anything unless it is a story and that children's abilities to understand narrative precede their ability to understand nonfiction". The ability of children to understand and to interact with this type of text grows as they are given opportunities to work with expository texts. (Yopp and Yopp, 2000, p. 411)

This summary will look at the difference between expository and narrative texts, the reasons educators give for integrating expository texts into daily teaching, and the ways in which teachers can accomplish this task. For the sake of clarity, the terms *expository text* and *informational text* will be used interchangeably.

Differences between Expository and Narrative Texts

Informational texts vary from narrative texts in several ways. Narrative texts are centered in setting, characters, and plot. The story is located within a certain frame of time and is focused on a particular goal. Informational texts follow a different structure. Duke and Kays (1998) point out that several distinctive textual differences are important because they place different demands on the reader:

(a) timeless verb constructions (e.g., "The lifecycle of every butterfly begins with an egg" in *The Butterfly Alphabet Book* by Brian Cassie and Jerry Pallotta, 1995);
(b) generic noun constructions (e.g., "Batik designers create a picture in wax on a piece of cloth" in *A Is for Asia* by Cynthia Chin-Lee, 1997);
(c) relational/existential verbs, that is, forms of to have and to be (e.g., "Indigo is a blue powder made from the indigo plant" in *K Is for Kwanzaa* by Juwanda G. Ford and Ken Wilson-Max, 1997);
(d) general statements at the opening and closing;
(e) use of technical vocabulary; and
(f) repetition of the topical theme (cited in Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 410).

Format, language, and content of information books differ from narrative texts. Children also need guidance if they are to understand how to use indexes and diagrams in information books (Kays & Duke, 1998, p. 53). New principles of organization need to be understood as subject matter controls the text rather than events. Information is organized into main and subordinate points using "less familiar syntax, more technical vocabulary and sometimes logical argument" (Mallett, 1992, p. 46).

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Why Should Expository Texts be Used in the Classroom?

There are many reasons educators feel it is important to provide more attention to non-narrative texts in the primary grades. Caswell and Duke (1998) suggest that the greatest reason centers on the single rationale that *"[m]ore experience with non-narrative texts in the early grades may help mitigate the difficulties many students encounter with these texts later in schooling"* (p. 108). The ability to read and gather information in today's society is more important than ever before. "Providing elementary students with lots of experience in reading, writing and listening to information text will pay off in big dividends when students have to deal with these kinds of texts in later schooling" (Kays & Duke, 1998, p. 52). Moss, Leone, and Dipillo (1997) agree and add, "teachers cannot assume that children will transfer their ability to read narrative into competent reading of informational text as they advance through school" (cited in Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 410). In fact, educators have noticed a pattern among students of steady reading progress made in the lower elementary grades. Then students encounter what has been termed a "fourth-grade slump" (Chall, 1983). During this time "students often show a decline in the rate of progress in reading or there is a decrease in the number of students reading at 'good levels'" (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998, p. 78; cited in Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 410). This slump has been blamed on the shift in materials that students are expected to read at this grade level. After several years of working primarily with narrative texts, students are suddenly required to read and acquire information for projects, reports, etc. from informational books. The transition proves challenging without prior exposure to informational texts (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 410).

A second reason to use expository texts in the classroom is that children learn about their world from these texts (Taylor, 2003; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Information books can open up new vistas of information that they would not glean from a story. But the manner in which a teacher approaches the use of expository books can determine how well the students will benefit from the text. Mallett (1992) suggests very deliberate planning when introducing children to information books.

> For example, when beginning new work it can be helpful for children to organize their prior knowledge through spoken language. Langer (1981) suggests that this achieves three things. First, teachers are able to determine levels of concept sophistication; second, the language used to encapsulate the ideas is revealed; and third, the teacher can glean how much background information would be helpful before the children meet the texts... Talk also helps children bring a sense of purpose to their use of information books. Otherwise they can overwhelm young learners who have not sorted their own thoughts and questions (p. 46).

If teachers lay the groundwork for using these texts, they can provide children with background information they need to continue growing as learners. As Fielding and Pearson (1994) found in their research, understanding "depends heavily on knowledge" (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 411). What we already know influences how much we learn from a text.

A third reason to use expository books is for affective reasons. Doiron (1994) argues that if informational books are not also included in read-aloud programs, then students will perceive that reading for enjoyment can only come from fictional texts (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 411). He contends that children are very curious about their world and have a high interest level in facts. In an informal survey of 126 primary-grade teachers, non-fiction materials made up only a small portion of the books read aloud. "[O]nly 14% of the materials teachers reported reading aloud on a given day were informational in nature" (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 411).

A fourth reason for using expository books is that they can be "an important catalyst for...literacy development" (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 109). Drawing on the case studies of two students, Isaac and Peter, who had struggled to enter the world of reading and writing, Caswell and Duke found that non-narrative texts were key entrance points for both students. "[T]hrough interactions with non-narrative texts, these students became more interested, purposeful, perseverant, knowledgeable, confident, and active in their reading and writing" (p. 109). The authors list several ways in which non-narrative texts served as a catalyst for literacy development.

a) Both students had a high interest level for topics most frequently covered in informational books such as space, dinosaurs, and volcanoes. When given a choice between non-narrative books and narrative books of the same topic, they chose non-narrative. Research supports the connection between interest and literacy performance.

> At least one study (Asher & Markell, 1974) has found that this link is particularly strong for boys. Other researchers have indicated that providing high-interest reading materials may be especially important for struggling readers and writers (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 114).

b) Caswell and Duke (1998) also believe that this strong link between interest and literacy is due to the fact that interest generates more purposeful reading. One of the students, Isaac, was able to articulate the link he experienced between interest and reading saying, "Because I love science and that's how I was reading, I get more reading, and when I put science and reading together...I get to know science and reading too" (p. 115).

Yopp and Yopp (2000) concur with the findings of Caswell and Duke: "[Informational texts capitalize on children's interests, whet their appetites for more information, and motivate them to read" (p. 412). When children realize purpose in reading, they become more active readers and writers. As in the case studies of Isaac and Peter, the teachers noticed that both boys became more engaged when reading non-narrative texts. "They asked questions, searched carefully for desired information, attacked words and new vocabulary more vigorously, and showed high levels of comprehension" (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 115).

c) The level of perseverance increases when children are reading texts that stimulate their interest. Reading was a laborious process for both Isaac and Peter. "Yet while both boys often shrugged their shoulders and gave up when reading stories, they persevered with non-narrative forms. These forms stimulated a greater willingness to make meaning from and with text" (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 115).

d) Non-narrative texts also serve as a catalyst for literacy development by building on knowledge children already possess. "Studies support the idea that the reading process is often greatly facilitated when the reader has a significant amount of relevant background knowledge to bring to bear on the text" (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 115). The benefits of background knowledge assist students in their comprehension as well as decoding low-frequency words. Caswell and Duke (1998) report Peter's own awareness of background knowledge by his comment, "I like to read about what I know" (p. 115).

e) One further benefit of non-narrative texts is that they may more closely match to the texts available in some homes.

> In Isaac's home, most of the texts read or written were non-narrative in form—bills, forms, notes, signs, advertising circulars. Novel and storybook reading and writing were not a part of Isaac's home context. When asked in what ways his father used literacy, Isaac reported, 'My dad reads bills, reads signs, maps to know where he's going, going to the bank, read some letters, Christmas cards. He doesn't read novels, stories.' When asked about his mother, he replied similarly, 'She doesn't have time for reading. She reads for cooking, for work.' In Peter's case, his father reported reading only two types of text, non-fiction texts and newspapers, and writing only one type of text, lists...(Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 115-116).

Educators can give many well-researched reasons for using information books in the classroom, we cannot ignore "the fact that we've entered the 'information age'...In the 'information age,' reading and writing expository text is more important than ever before" (Kays & Duke, 1998, p. 52). It is also important that children not only understand how to access that information but also understand the format and language of the information. Giving elementary age students experiences in reading, writing, and listening to expository texts will assist them in later schooling and life. Educators have suggested several ways to incorporate informational books and materials into literacy programs.

Using Informational Books in the Classroom

1. Teachers are encouraged to include information books in their read-aloud time. Books teachers choose to read aloud to students have great impact on their own independent selections. "Robinson, Larsen, Haupt, & Mohlman revealed that when given opportunities to choose books, preschool and kindergarten children select familiar books more frequently than unfamiliar books" (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 413). Reading an information book aloud to the class may stir their interest and encourage them to choose a similar book for their own personal reading.
2. Another way to incorporate informational books is to pair it with a narrative book read to the class. Questions may arise from a narrative selection that only informational books could answer. "Not only can fiction spark the questions that lead children to nonfiction, but nonfiction can build the background knowledge that allows children to more deeply appreciate fiction" (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 413).
3. Content area textbooks may also be supplemented with informational trade books. For example, after reading a selection from the textbook on weather, children can be divided into groups and study elements of weather through informational texts (Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p. 413). There are numerous advantages to this, "including ensuring that there are materials available on the topic for many different reading levels" (Kays & Duke, 1998, p. 53).
4. Reading instruction can be taken directly from informational texts, which may be used in place of basals or as part of a home reading program. The advantage to this would be the possibility of "introduc[ing] new and interesting facts to parents and expand parent's and children's repertoire and enthusiasm for reading" (Kays & Duke, 1998, p. 53).

5. Informational books should be a part of the classroom library. "Information books are among the best-loved books in the classroom and are especially popular for paired and grouped reading" (Kays & Duke, 1998, p. 52).
6. Informational books may used as part of writing instruction for writers' workshops, author's study, or theme-based projects (Kays and Duke, 1998, p. 53).

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the main reason given for use of informational, or expository, texts in the primary classroom is to better prepare students for the informational texts they will be exposed to in later schooling. However, there are other reasons that appear to be equally valid. Informational texts may provide access to reading and literacy for diverse types of learners. Also, informational texts will only expand children's literary experiences.

While encouraging the use of information texts in the classroom, Caswell & Duke also offer a word of caution to educators. Often when new ideas are presented, the pendulum is allowed to swing wide; they encourage keeping the pendulum to only a slight swing. Although their research stresses the importance of using non-narrative texts, they are careful to qualify that recommendation. "[W]e want to emphasize that *we are not* advocating focusing exclusively or even primarily on these forms. Rather, we argue against a view of early literacy development as a process of learning to read, write, and appreciate *only* stories, and we argue for a view of early literacy development as a process of learning to read, write, and appreciate *many textual forms*" (Caswell & Duke, 1998, p. 116).

Internet Resources

"Reading Nonfiction: Learning and Understanding (from Stenhouse Publishers)
http://www.stenhouse.com/pdfs/0072ch07.pdf
A full-text chapter from the book "Nonfiction matters: Reading, Writing, and Research in Grades 3-8". This chapter includes information on how to promote nonfiction in the classroom, purposes for reading nonfiction, and differences between narrative and expository text.

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